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## A MODERN VIEW OF THE HEREAFTER

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REV. W. E. GLANVILLE, PH.D.  
Sycamore, Ill.

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“Non omnis moriar” wrote the Roman poet whose musing on the hereafter had confirmed his longing after immortality. Never has the thought of immortality been absent from the human mind since the dawn of recorded history. The question is as vital and insistent today as it has ever been. It would seem that immortality is one of the original, imperishable intuitions of the soul. The peoples of the Occident, no less than the peoples of the Orient, have had their imagination filled with this fascinating yet baffling subject. Poets have dreamed, prophets have taught, philosophers have reasoned, and musicians, painters, and sculptors have exercised their skill to give adequate expression to this master theme of human destiny. The very thought of the annihilation of personality when the breath leaves the body is abhorrent, whether to the Christian or the non-Christian, the saint or the sinner.

My own dim life should teach me this,  
That life shall live for evermore;  
Else earth is darkness at the core  
And dust and ashes all that is.

But every age must interpret this ineradicable hope in its own language and according to the larger knowledge it may fortunately possess.

So epochal has been the accumulation of knowledge during the past century that

Doubts to the world's child heart unknown  
Question us now from star and stone.

And while boasting is excluded because we feel that in the wider horizon of knowledge we have today we still are ignorant of so much we should like to know, nevertheless we are thankful that the eyes of our understanding have been opened to discern more of the truth of things than earlier generations were able to receive.

## MODERN ASTRONOMY

To begin with, astronomy has thrown into eclipse a host of old-time notions concerning the place of our planet in the universe. It is not the great world it was formerly thought to be. It is not the center of all created bodies attended by sun, moon, and stars for illumination and beauty. It is not the fixed, stable world, the eternal abode of the millions of humanity according to generally received ancient ideas. The stellar sphere is not a revolving shell as was once thought. As out from the quiet, sheltered, landlocked harbor the mariner guides his boat to what seems to be an illimitable ocean, so in these latter days astronomy has disclosed to our astonished view a universe vast and amazing in its extent. Stars at distances so immense and varying that light traveling at the rate of 190,000 miles a second requires three, ten, a hundred years to leap the space between them and us; stars so enormous and brilliant that, compared with them, the sun is like a match light compared with an arc light; our own sun such a globe of seething, fiery tempest that 1,000,000 bodies the size of our earth massed together are required to represent his girth and volume—these are some of the facts which astronomy submits to us to demonstrate the grandeur and majesty of the physical universe.

Provided with these facts and the legitimate inferences they sanction, it is clear that the old-time ideas of the greatness and permanence of the earth and the comparative insignificance of sun, moon, and stars must be canceled as contradictory to the truth of things.

## APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE

With the cancellation of those old-time notions must go the picturesque conceptions and fancies of the underworld and the hereafter, of heaven and hell, which fill the apocalyptic books and passages of the Jewish and Christian Scriptures and find corresponding expression in Greek and Roman, Assyrian and Egyptian literature. For all of these conceptions were earth-bound and earth-centered. As in the days of Noah, the world was destroyed by a flood, a new order arose, and a fresh start was made, so, the world being overrun again by evil, there shall be an end of all things, a summary intervention by God who will consign to per-

dition the evildoers, renovate the earth, restore a lost paradise, and make the world a heavenly abode for the good. This is the chief underlying idea of apocalyptic literature. Applied to special crises, as in the Book of Daniel, which has reference to the conflict between Judaism and Antiochus Epiphanes, and the Book of Revelation, which deals with the conflict between Christianity and the Roman Empire, it sets forth the overthrow of the enemies of God's people. The end of the world as immediately pending was confidently expected by the early Christians and much of the New Testament is burdened with this expectation, the influence of which pervades the New Testament writings generally. As to the details of the world to come, according to these old-time ideas, some are found in the biblical apocalypses and some, which have greatly impressed themselves on later thought, especially the writings of Dante and Milton, are found in extra-biblical apocalypses as, e.g., the Secrets of Enoch and the Apocalypse of Peter. Among the punishments prescribed for evildoers in the underworld the Apocalypse of Peter informs us that blasphemers hang by their tongues; murderers are pitched into a fearsome gorge and bitten by reptiles; persecutors stand waist-deep in flames; the merciless rich, clad in filthy rags, are rolled about on sharp, red-hot stones; idolaters are burned—curious reminders these of the biblical descriptions of the bottomless pit and the lake of fire reserved for the devil and his angels where they are “tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb: and the smoke of their torment ascendeth up forever and ever.”

On the other hand we have the apocalyptic picture of the New Jerusalem, the final abode of the good, a city that comes down from God out of heaven; a city surpassing in beauty and brilliancy the older city; a city so filled with the glory of God that the light of the sun and the moon is unnecessary; a city through which flows the river of life-giving water by the side of which grows the tree of life; a city adorned with the glory and honor of despoiled nations; a city whose inhabitants are exempt from sickness, sorrow, and death; a city whose walls are of jasper and whose gates are of pearl; a city for those who do His commandments that they may have right to the tree of life and enter in through the gates to reign

forever and ever. And, in harmony with apocalyptic vision, all this is to occur soon. The book is not to be sealed. "Behold, I come quickly." A terrestrial heaven, a subterranean hell: this is the outstanding message of apocalyptic literature. Nor could it be otherwise when we recall the earth-bound, earth-centered conception of the universe, the dominating, the only conception possible at that time.

#### PHYSICAL RESURRECTION

Concurrent with these ideas is that of physical resurrection which naturally finds its home in the same school of thought. The subterranean hell, the terrestrial heaven, the beautiful New Jerusalem are very substantial, material places—places unsuitable for the abode of flitting phantoms. Hence man is incomplete without his body, and he must have his own and that of no one else, for in some degree the body is the expression of the personality, has fitted and gloved itself to the personality, and so has become an integral part of the man.

If, as was held, all who in past generations had been loyal to the nation's religious ideals were to share in the glory of the new heavens and the new earth as well as the generation living when the Lord appeared to restore the kingdom again to Israel and establish the new Jerusalem, then it must be possible for those who had fallen asleep to recover the bodies they had surrendered at death, so that in their own bodies, glorified to harmonize with the glorified city, they might enjoy the blessedness of the glorified forevermore. Also eternal punishment was inconceivable apart from a sentient body to be tormented. Consequently, when the stupendous climax, the end of the age, came there would be a general resurrection of the identical bodies of the departed, a general judgment, and a final award. Such was the program of human destiny mapped out by the apocalyptic writers of the Jewish and Christian Scriptures—a program the details of which were inspired by the sway of a conception of the universe which astronomy today affirms was erroneous.

#### REINCARNATION

Dealing with the same problem, Hindu philosophers propounded the theory of reincarnation. Manifestly this theory is also colored

by the cosmological idea of the supreme importance of the earth common to the ancient and mediaeval periods. From the Hindus this theory passed to different peoples. Pythagoras of Greece, it is reported, claimed that in a previous incarnation he had been present at the siege of Troy. The ancient Jews also reveal traces of it in their thinking. In the gospels we read of the man born blind. "Who did sin, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" asked the disciples, the inference from which is that if he was born blind because *he* had sinned he must have sinned in a former terrestrial life. The idea that Jesus Christ himself was a reincarnation of one of the old prophets, Elijah or Jeremiah, also finds place in the gospels. Today this ancient theory flourishes in our western hemisphere, a prominent publicist of our own generation having been announced by the custodians of theosophist mysteries to be a composite reincarnation of Julius Caesar and Oliver Cromwell. The difference between this theory and that which is characteristic of the apocalyptic literature is that the latter predicates a resuscitation of the actual body surrendered at death, while the former assumes a succession of physical births. They both agree in locating the postmortem life here on earth, hence implying the eternity of the earth as an abode for man. The question of the persistence and identity of personality is involved in the theory of reincarnation. Personality is self-conscious. If the theory of reincarnation be correct, what evidence can you or I produce to prove that in other bodies we were part of the life of the world a hundred or a thousand years ago? Heredity and family genealogy are also involved in the same question. Human souls taking up their abode in the bodies of sub-human animals is another and a very queer phase of the question. The only practical value at all discernible in the theory of reincarnation is the attempt it makes to provide a body for the soul when the present body becomes lifeless.

#### EVOLUTION

The theory of evolution which forms the framework of much of the thinking of our time opens the door to considerations which do no violence to the ascertained knowledge of today concerning the

laws and life of the universe. Wonderful is the panorama which this theory unfolds of the progression of life on the planet. There was a time when no organized life existed. Then came a time when the humblest forms of animal and plant life appeared. This was succeeded by the period when gigantic forests abounded, to be followed by the period when tremendous beasts, mammoths and mastodons, were lords of the world. Then came the human period when by the processes of natural selection psychical progress, registered in the brain, began to exceed physical development, and the reign of man began.

No fact in nature is so significant as is the extreme physical similarity and the enormous psychical divergence between man and the group of animals to which he traces his pedigree. It shows that when humanity began its career an entirely new chapter in the history of the universe opened. Henceforth the life of the soul came to be of first importance and the bodily life was subordinated to it. The process of zoölogical change came to an end. The process of psychological change began.

Through all this wonderful panorama it is clear that one increasing purpose runs, and that purpose finds its consummation and culmination in man. The world as we know it today, the world of plant, animal, and human life, represents a certain stage of cosmic change and progress, a certain condition favorable to the habitation and education of man. Is this the final period? Shall man

who seemed so fair,  
Such splendid purpose in his eyes,  
Who rolled the psalm to wintry skies,  
Who built him fanes of fruitless prayer,  
Who trusted God was love indeed  
And love Creation's final law—  
Tho' Nature, red in tooth and claw  
With rapine, shriek'd against his creed—  
Who loved, who suffered countless ills,  
Who battled for the True and Just,  
Be blown about the desert dust  
Or sealed within the iron hills?

Is man, the goal of all the marvelous processes through which the world has passed, to perish, to suffer annihilation after a few years' experience of earthly life?

We decline so to believe. In fact, so impressed are we with the manifold evidences of purpose all along the line of the earth's history, so impressed are we with the greatness and intelligence of the Power that has made all this universe possible and that is ceaselessly at work therein, that we find it impossible to believe that "we shall be put to permanent intellectual confusion." The very thought of evolution carries within it the thought of the perpetuation of self-conscious existence. No end is conceivable. We feel, we know, that the advent of Jesus Christ introduced a new era in the education and progress of man. We feel, we know, that the influence of Jesus Christ has affected mankind in a manner unique and unprecedented, a manner fit to be called divine, a manner which is nothing less than a world-movement. We feel, we know, that the finest manifestations of human progress during the past 1,900 years have been the direct result of the impact of his spirit on humanity. We feel, we know, that when Jesus Christ disappeared in physical form from the world he did not disappear into nothingness, but that in the totality, the perfected glory of his being, body and soul, full of life unquenchable and exhaustless, which had conquered death, he went into the unseen.

And we also believe, against the testimony of our limited senses, if needs be, that human life, sanctified and glorified as it was in the person of Jesus Christ, is destined to an immortality of fulness of life and fulness of opportunity for the service of righteousness and goodness which will exceed our boldest expectations. And whatever is essential to the outworking of this divine evolutionary purpose for men we may be sure will be forthcoming. "We shall not be unclothed but clothed upon." "The body that is sown is *not* the body that shall be." As Sir Oliver Lodge suggests: The identity of material particles of the old body is not essential to the identity of the person who inhabited the body. And further: "The term body may be used to indicate anything which is able to manifest feelings, emotions, and thoughts, and at the same time to operate efficiently in its environment." We pass through constant change of body here and now. On the page of a magazine I see a group of photographs of a world-known celebrity at different ages of his life. His appearance at the age of six is totally dissimilar



from his appearance at the age of forty. A man at 90 has used and cast aside a dozen different bodies. The present body is mortal. We are born with the seeds of death in us. The natural body is subject to disease, death, dissolution. It is a temporary tenement. From the home of his boyhood the lad of fourteen sets forth to a distant land. Thirty years later he returns and, behold, what a change has occurred in him meantime! His mother does not recognize him. No longer does she see the boy whose image she had carried in her memory these many years. And not only has he changed physically, but also psychically. The fact is we are in a state of constant change psychically as well as physically. In view of this fact, demonstrable in the present life, we need not the aid of the crude fancies of apocalyptic literature or reincarnation to express our thought of the hereafter and of human destiny. The truth these fancies picture forth we perceive and believe, but with the fanciful pictures themselves we may dispense and thereby realize no loss whatever but rather immeasurable gain, because our mind is left free and unfettered to welcome and adjust itself to whatever revelations farther knowledge may disclose. We are free of the universe. Out from the nests and nooks we call our earthly homes we shall one day pass not into nothingness but into life, life not impoverished but unhampered by the limitations that restrict us here where the problem of the freedom of the will will be solved for those who are qualified to exercise a larger freedom, and where powers of being scarcely suspected or but faintly realized in this life will find scope for unwearied service. For death is the gate of life. To die is gain.